

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 022 828

UD 005 714

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THE ELEMENTARY TEACHER AND THE DISADVANTAGED: BUG IN A TUB.

Pub Date Oct 65

Note-6p.

Journal Cit-The Teachers College Journal; v37 n1 p10, 48-51 Oct 1965

EDRS Price MF-\$0.25 HC-\$0.32

Descriptors-*DISADVANTAGED GROUPS, EDUCATIONAL IMPROVEMENT, EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE, EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES, *INSERVICE TEACHER EDUCATION, *PRESERVICE EDUCATION, SCHOOL POLICY, TEACHER IMPROVEMENT, TEACHER ROLE

The national mandate to "teach the disadvantaged" child requires specific preservice and inservice teacher preparation. The classroom teacher in particular will need to make a firm, deliberate commitment to improve the instruction of the disadvantaged pupils already in his class. However, there are interwoven limitations imposed by the characteristics of the teacher himself, by the disadvantaged child, by the school, and by the home and community. Nevertheless, the teacher must strive to overcome these barriers--through further professional education, a better understanding and acceptance of the children, and curriculums and standards adjusted to the child's needs. School policies and practices may need to be improved to better serve disadvantaged learners, and compensatory and enriched classroom experiences should be provided. (NH)

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS—

In addition to the writers, several persons have helped in planning and preparing this edition of the *Journal*: the I.S.U. Audio-Visual Department, all pictures except the one from Sen. Bayh's office; Dr. Paul W. Koester, suggestions for most of the writers; and the University's Division of Printing, reproduction services.

The Teachers College Journal of the School of Education is printed at the Indiana State University Division of Printing

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Published October, November, December, January, March, and May by Indiana State University, Terre Haute, Indiana. Entered as second-class matter October 5, 1931, at the Post Office at Terre Haute, Indiana, under act of August 24, 1912.

EDUCATIONAL
PRESS
ASSOCIATION
OF
AMERICA

THE
TEACHERS
COLLEGE

JOURNAL

VOLUME XXXVII. No. 1. OCTOBER, 1965

An Appeal for Teacher Commitment. . .

The Elementary Teacher and the Disadvantaged— Bug in a Tub

By Paul W. Koester

TEACH THE disadvantaged children. This is a moral mandate which comes to the schools in part from the leadership of the President and the financial support passed by the Congress in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 as a significant part of the war on poverty. Under this act school administrators will be submitting proposals for available funds for the initiation of new programs to improve the learning potential of disadvantaged children. These programs will include many innovations: earlier instruction for preschool children, supplementary instruction during evenings and summers, cultural and language enrichment, school-home cooperation, community resources utilization, reduced teacher-pupil ratio, and new instructional materials and programs. Yet the obvious, critical factor upon which the success of compensatory programs is dependent is the capacity, energy, and commitment of a teacher to make innovations in the classroom, innovations which will significantly enhance disadvantaged children's opportunities to learn and be successful in school.

Although large proportions of disadvantaged children tend to be concentrated in particular areas and consequently school buildings within urban centers, many disadvantaged children are distributed among both urban and rural school districts outside the target areas for compensatory programs. In these critical urban centers of high concentration of disadvantaged children, special compensatory programs may be implemented by teams of supervisors and teachers specifically trained to marshal their energies and resources for a concerted attack upon the problems encountered in assisting disadvantaged children to learn and achieve school success.

Preservice and inservice professional preparation for teaching children from disadvantaged homes and community are essential for the successful fulfilling of the mandate, "Teach the dis-

advantaged children." For this reason funds are available for preservice and inservice preparation of teachers in programs such as the NDEA institute. However even though the need for professional preparation is recognized and some programs for inservice training are being made available through federal, state, and local efforts, the majority of the teachers will not have the time or opportunity in the foreseeable future to prepare themselves in any formally organized programs for teaching the disadvantaged children they meet daily in their classrooms. The mandate is not just to the teachers with special training; the mandate comes clearly to all teachers. The schools have collectively committed all teachers to improve the learning potentials of all children, especially those categorized as disadvantaged. School leaders and committees will acquire funds for new programs and materials for the teaching of the disadvantaged; the successful implementation of the programs will be the responsibility of the individual classroom teacher without special training, with little guidance and evaluation, monitored only by the desire to do his best, and motivated by an idealistic expectation that he can teach every child. The classroom teacher will have to make a deliberate, personal commitment to improve instruction for the disadvantaged children with whom he is already acquainted in his classroom, in the same school staffed by the selfsame personnel, under almost identical administrative policy, within the context of the same community norms and expectation as he is presently teaching. The teacher will have to bring new life to the classroom for disadvantaged children within a current, ongoing program.

In reflecting upon the situation faced by teachers striving to better teach disadvantaged children, the writer is reminded of an incident which well illustrates the limitations within which teachers seek to teach every child.

Under particular conditions communities within the midwest are almost inundated with the plague of boxelder bugs. Even though doors and

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most readily set aside and due to time pressures understandably so. However I believe that other more easily organized parts of a program might well be postponed or even abandoned in order to find the time for individual conferences.

After five weeks of the institute had passed, all of the teachers and the school community workers were assigned to the sites in which they would be working for the coming year. Orientation periods were held to brief them on how and where to obtain needed information, how to establish rapport with the host agency, and how to interview the parents of prospective students. During this phase of their training, they were again given the opportunity to be with leaders who could encourage them, help solve their problems, and continue to keep enthusiasm at a high level.

It is at this point that the story actually begins even though we have been together for five weeks. It is at this point that a particular written phrase may come to the fore or certain spoken words will seep through to help work out a problem. From here we all once more look at where we are going, what more we (as a group or individually) need to work on to direct us toward our goals. We may now then gather in our inservice sessions to plan together for future work. Hopefully, we are more ready to express ourselves, more willing to question, and certainly more ready to grow and thereby be better equipped to help others grow and de-

velop, more specifically, some X number of three and four year old children living in some X community in which we are dedicated to work.

These communities are considered to be "disadvantaged." There is no doubt that teachers working with children from such areas must know the environmental background of each of the pupils in their classrooms. There is no doubt that it is extremely important to work as closely as possible with the significant adults (parents, aunts, grandparents) of these pupils. There is no doubt that a lower teacher-pupil ratio is necessary to improve the learning possibilities for these pupils. There is no doubt that proper and adequate materials will enrich the environment of three and four year old youngsters. Fortunately, monies are forthcoming to provide these things for the "disadvantaged." Now our culture seems more than willing (almost compelled) to carry out a war on poverty through education. It seems to me that educators *must* take advantage of this so-called "disadvantaged" situation and carry out the good educational practices we have been talking about for a long time. Many of the obstacles we have long lamented have been removed in these anti-poverty programs. We are now challenged to do what we have discussed for many years. Good education applies to any subculture. If we can carry it out in the "culturally deprived" areas, perhaps we can become strong enough to educate more effectively in "all" areas.

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windows were closed tightly, these creatures would enter the house in large numbers. These bugs did little or no damage; in fact, they were fairly attractive with orange stripes down their backs. Their only annoyance was the fact that they were around. The bugs collected on the window sills, on the floor, and in the sink and bathtub. The first morning's task during the siege was to remove the bugs. This was a matter of sweeping them from the sills and floor and flushing them down the drain of the sinks and tub. Then the writer began to watch these creatures in the tub. These bugs possessed a certain fascination for the viewer. It was easy to impute anthropomorphic abilities to these crawling things. Each one continuously struggled to climb the steep, slick wall of the tub. Just when there seemed to be some progress up the side of the tub, the bug would slide back down again. The bug would simply go to another place and start again. When these bugs became ex-

hausted, they would stop to "catch their breath" and start anew. The writer will admit that he began to identify with the struggle of these bugs (actually to the point of flipping these bugs from the tub in respect for their striving and extending their opportunity and time for survival.)

In some ways the bug-in-tub situation is analogous to the teacher's struggling with limitations in seeking to improve instruction of disadvantaged children. The bug did not design his own structure or abilities. Had he done so, he would have had wings. He did not choose his equally limited, floundering friends. Neither did he select the tub to which he found himself confined. Yet the only thing to be done within the confines was to look up and strive to climb the barriers.

The teacher in seeking to teach the disadvantaged is circumscribed by four walls within which he must teach:

First, limitation of the self. Each teacher is hedged by limits set by heredity, health, intelligence, education, work experience, attitudes, values; one has little choice in the selection of the limits which confine him. A single teacher cannot possess an adequate measure of all the human capacities he perhaps ought to have in terms of the needs of the children to be taught. A teacher cannot be everything to every child in his class.

Second, limitations of the children. Teachers do not choose the bugs to be taught in the tub. Disadvantaged children have accumulative syndromes which minimize their learning potentials. These blocks may include health and emotional problems, limited cultural and language experience, restricted vocabulary and verbal expression, negative attitudes growing out of a sense of failure. Yet, with the limitations these children must be taught.

Third, limitations of the school. Each teacher will encounter limits in time, space, and money for instructional aids, teaching materials, class loads, curricular and supervisory leadership, and administrative policies and procedures. The teacher will continue to devote energy to the many tasks of conducting school and managing a classroom.

Fourth, limitations of the home and community. Disadvantaged children learn what they have a need and opportunity to learn within the limits of the home-community environment. The community sets the norms, values, and expectations by which parents and children approach and evaluate the school and its staff. Further, teachers reflect community attitudes and concerns for children in the goals and procedures of their classroom instruction.

In communities in which commitments and provisions are made to educate all the children, teachers reflect the same concern. If communities tend to neglect certain segments of children, the schools will reflect this neglect. Consequently, the success of instruction is limited by the interests, values, and resources of the community.

In no sense should these enumerated barriers be considered as discrete; each is a part of a dynamic, functioning system, a system which circumscribes and limits the success of a teacher. Many negative responses occur when teachers are almost overwhelmed by the restrictions of the educational tub. One might depreciate the worth of one's self and one's efforts. It may be a shock to realize that one is just a bug in a tub.

If the teacher identifies some bugs who have difficulty learning in a regular classroom, then

these bugs may be classified and given a label. If the teacher does not know what to do with a child, at least he can be labeled. The label explains why little can be done; the child is "a slow learner," "mentally retarded," "low in intelligence," or "lazy."

Another negative response might be to devalue or ignore certain classes of bugs. After all the schools can't get every bug over the wall; some might just as well be washed down the drain; the bugs might as well drop out. But drop out to where?

The barriers are immediately available as bases for excuses for not striving for improvement. Many promising innovations are rejected with the citation of the perpetual limitations enumerated.

Some become so discouraged if not exhausted by the struggle against the many hedges that seem almost to kick back, that they give up the endeavor and return to the center of the tub, to less demanding, more monotonous, yet perhaps more satisfying activity of "holding school."

A teacher finding himself within these bounds should have one professional goal—to throw himself headlong with abandonment, against the barriers which block him. These barriers, unlike the sides of a tub, may be moved back for more living and learning space. Life and learning within this tub can be made more pleasant. These obstacles may in part be transcended. The entire educational enterprise is organized to make an eternal attack upon these barriers. The programs for the war on poverty and for teaching the disadvantaged children will be a massive, critical attack upon one of the most formidable obstructions to learning—the deprivation of children.

The successful attack upon one barrier will minimize the limits of all the other barriers. The incessant struggle against any and all barriers to learning demands and merits the total energy and commitment of each teacher.

By close inspection of the young bugs in the educational tub, educators have recently thought there ought to be some further grouping and re-naming of a significant proportion of the bugs. Maturing, acute visual perception is required to discern among the bugs those who were disadvantaged. However, these bugs have been failing in the schools for some time. Time is required for educational diagnosticians to find common symptoms of educational problems among children from particular families, communities, classes, and

ances. Changes in values and priorities are required to discriminate between diseases resulting from inherent weaknesses within individuals through heredity and diseases spread by infectious contamination.

Teachers in their classrooms have learned to teach the physically handicapped, the emotionally disturbed, the mentally retarded, the gifted, and the slow learner. These bugs could be taught by the identification of almost absolute, if not inherent characteristic weaknesses. A child might be classed as slow, lazy, disinterested, hostile, or dirty. These characteristics were assumed to be part of his nature.

In contrast, the maturity of educational leaders is made evident by the new labels given to the newly discovered sub-group of children who have difficulty achieving in school. Professional visual acuity to see educational needs of children seems to become keener with a developing sense of social sensitivity and responsibility. One of the terms used in this paper is "disadvantaged." This term, along with its many synonyms, not only identifies a child with some discernible behavioral characteristics, but the term also implies a cause for these characteristics. The term explains that the child learned what he had the opportunity to learn within the cultural *milieu* of his rearing. The term further implies action. If a child has difficulty learning knowledge, attitudes, or skills, the learning disability is the result of some deprivation. A simple statement of the action is that an enrichment program must be provided to compensate for the initial deprivation. The problem is therefore what might a teacher do to push back the limiting barriers and to provide a compensatory program for the disadvantaged children within his classroom.

A teacher can do many things to overcome his personal limitations which may tend to weaken his effectiveness in teaching the disadvantaged. All professional education is based upon the assumption that teachers can learn. Each teacher can acquire more knowledge, gain new insights, develop new skills, become more sensitive to particular educational needs, and make new and greater commitments.

Each teacher should seek to better understand the conditions which blunt, twist, and regress the constructive learning potentialities of children. Upon the basis of this deeper understanding, the teacher can recognize and respect the ability of children to learn within the conditions under which they are being reared. The teacher can

truly accept a child as he is because of what has happened to him. Each negative attitude of a teacher which tends to further isolate a disadvantaged child may be recognized, analyzed, and dealt with. Each teacher can make a deeper commitment to improve his competence to teach disadvantaged children in his class.

What may a teacher do to compensate for the limitations of the children to be taught? These children must be accepted as they are. A carpenter newly employed to complete a building on a cluttered lot does not damn the half-built structure or junk-strewn lot; he just cleans the lot and attaches the next rafter in its place.

The teacher must not set arbitrary, unreasonable standards to establish failure. If a child is tone deaf, he is not required to sing daily in a choir to demonstrate his lack of ability to sing. The child, the teacher, and the choir members soon become aware of the disability without the daily rehearsal. A child who is color blind is not expected to paint a rainbow. He may be encouraged to do something in charcoal. If a child has both legs removed above the knees, he would not be expected to daily jump hurdles and run races with children with normal legs. He would be taught to develop skills in sports better suited to his abilities.

An already handicapped, emotionally burdened child needs to find success, not more failure, in school. The teacher must select and order learning opportunities in a manner to give a disadvantaged child the sense of power to do something. An adequate self-concept is not only developed by the teacher's acceptance alone but also by the child's sense of accomplishment. The child must have confidence and be able to demonstrate his abilities in performing tasks. Teachers can assist a child to overcome many of his limitations by starting with his abilities to do something, presenting learning tasks in sequential units, providing patient direction and encouragement, and giving ample reinforcement for any achievement. In compensatory programs teachers demonstrate that disadvantaged children learn what they have the opportunity to learn. These children achieve significant gains in learning with improved instruction designed for their specific learning needs.

There are many limitations found within the school which tend to thwart programs for teaching the disadvantaged child. Although school practices and policies are designed for the effective education of all children, many school practices may actually neutralize efforts to reach and teach

disadvantaged children. Although each teacher is bound by the limits set by school policy, the professional and moral responsibility of the teacher is to make an individual effort to ameliorate school practices and conditions in the best interests of disadvantaged learners. The negative effects of grading policies can be neutralized through individual conferences with the children. The limitations set by large classes can be partially overcome by deliberate, sustained effort to provide individual attention and instruction.

Adjustments in grade norms for achievement may be made for disadvantaged children without weakening the instructional program. Teachers can, through special efforts, collect and utilize materials within the classroom which are more appropriate to the needs of the learners than basal texts assigned to the grade.

Policies related to textbook rental may often be more harmful to the children than they are beneficial in educating irresponsible parents. Intimidating young children in order to coerce, correct, or punish parents is morally wrong and a violation of a teacher's professional dedication to the task of educating all children.

Failure of a school to make books and supplies available for young children because parents are irresponsible, the daily harassment of children for money for books and supplies, and the withholding of the report cards because the father spends his money foolishly are all examples of practices which will militate against the education of the disadvantaged. Each teacher should resist these unjust practices which thwart efforts to reach these children. A slum child from a broken home cannot be taught that he belongs in the school when he is penalized for not having economically responsible parents. Many teachers buy instructional supplies and books for disadvantaged children in their rooms rather than embarrass a child for not paying his way.

Almost all of the war-on-poverty programs are

designed finally to improve the conditions in homes and community which limit the potentialities of children. The teacher must utilize all available instructional resources to compensate for the deprivation in the home and community. The classroom must be an enriched world of things and activities which reach out and grab the interests of these children. The child must be bombarded with multisensory experiences. Upon these experiences concepts are formed, language is developed, vocabulary is increased. For an example, Harry J. Hayes, fourth grade teacher in Chicago, in an article titled "Language Arts Program for Culturally Deprived" (*Chicago Schools Journal*, May, 1965) reports his students made significant gains in school achievement as a result of what he calls the "saturation technique" of teaching. This reported program illustrates what one teacher can do to compensate for the limitation of the home and community.

The national effort to teach every child is built upon the assumption that every child can learn. Compensatory programs demonstrate that teachers can teach disadvantaged children; disadvantaged children can learn and achieve in programs specifically designed for them.

Dedicated teachers must continue to strive to overcome the limitations which debilitate disadvantaged children and doom many to school failure. The improvement of any limiting condition will tend to ameliorate other frustrating conditions.

Life in the educational tub can be more tolerable. Disadvantaged children find the tub even more confining than do the teachers. The tub can be a pressing, defeating, torturing sweat box—a miserable cubicle. The teacher can look up, out, and over. He knows the powers and potentialities of all learners. Each teacher tries to lift every one of his bugs out of the tub. He will be able to lift many. He does not really work alone. The resources of a nation are working with him.